



## Latin Loan Words in the Italian Language and Their Functions

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### Abstract

The Italian language is derived from Vulgar Latin. Borrowing words from another language is an important way for the development of a language. Since its emergence, the Italian language has been picking up neologisms from other languages. The Latin loan words in the Italian language can be analyzed from three different aspects – the time when they are borrowed, the fields they are involved in and the part of speech they belong to – in order to delve into the relation between the two languages and the influence that Latin imposed on Italian.

**Key word:** Italian language; Loan words; Latin

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### INTRODUCTION

The Italian language is a member of the Romance languages, which is a branch of the Indo-European language family. From the seventeenth to nineteenth century, “the Romance language group, including Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, Provençal, Franco-Provençal, French, Ladino, Sardinian, Italian, Dalmatian, Romanian, were gradually taking shape.” (Dardano, 2001) In general, the Romance languages are evolved from Latin, technically from Vulgar Latin rather than classical Latin. Classical Latin is a written language used by scholars in their literature works. Its grammatical

structure, word formation and style remain unchanged after centuries. On the contrary, Vulgar Latin is spoken by the public in their everyday life, so it changes with social progression. It might also have some alteration according to one’s birthplace and social status. While classical Latin and Vulgar Latin differentiate in many aspects like phonics, grammar, syntax and vocabulary, they are not independent from each other, but two existing forms of the same language.

The Italian language is originated from Latin, which is pervasively reflected in the language itself. From three perspectives, namely the time they are borrowed, the fields they are utilized and the part of speech they belong to, an analysis of the Latin loan words in the Italian language can semantically expose the relation between the two languages and on an objective and comprehensive basis demonstrate the Italian language system and the role Latin plays in its development.

### 1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE

In Roman Empire, inhabitants from different ethnicities within the present Italian territory were consistently called ITALI in order to popularize the Latin language and minimize the distinctions among languages of different ethnicities. “In the Middle Ages, people would rather use adjectives like *LUMBARDEUS* and *TUSCANUS* than words like *ITALICUS* so that the region where the speaker exactly came from could be recognized.” (Lotti, 2000)

Recorded history (including “*una carta pisana*” in 730 AD, “*una memoria lucchese*” in 759 AD and “*uno scritto lucchese*” in 765 AD ) evidences that the Vulgar Latin spoken by the Italian local population in the eighth century differentiated so profoundly from the written Latin that they were even viewed as two independent languages. Later at the end of the century, *Veronese Riddle* (*Indovinello Veronese* in Italian) written in Vulgar Latin

proved that people could write and comment with a more popular dialect instead of Latin.

In spite of previous records, *Placito<sup>1</sup> Capuano*, an official document in 960AD, was affirmed as “the first document ever written in the Italian language” (Marazzini, 2004). Later, local Vulgar Latin in Italy began to appear in art and literature works. Since the mid-thirteenth century, especially in the first several decades of the fourteenth century, Florentine dialect had been eclipsing other ones by virtue of the booming in culture and academic study and the comprehensive education system brought by economic prosperity.

In the fifteenth century, the development of Italian dialects was trapped in a dilemma where Latin was about to be reinvigorated as the humanism gained its power with a renaissance of the Roman art. On the contrary, the Italian language had been progressing with the popularity of printing techniques in the second half of the fifteenth century, the further study on etyma and sentence pattern of the Italian language started from the sixteenth century and the spread of Enlightenment Movement in the eighteenth century. In the second half of the nineteenth century, written Italian shared more traits in common with oral Italian as the nation unified, and gradually developed into the modern Italian.

## 2. THE ORIGINS OF ITALIAN VOCABULARY

Historically, Italian vocabulary consists of three branches – words of Latin origin, loan words and neologisms. Italian words of Latin origin, “of the highest proportion in the Italian vocabulary,” are evolved from the Latin language and preserved after the Italian language came into being (Dardano, 2001). Loan words are those borrowed from foreign languages such as French and German. Learned loan words imported from Latin and ancient Greek works by scholars are also included. As for neologisms, they are, based on existing Italian words, created in compliance with word formation rules of the Italian language, e.g. addition of prefixes and suffixes or combination of morphemes.

Italian vocabulary can also be divided into two branches that are both related to Latin – words of Latin origin and learned loan words. Both of them derive from Latin, and the fundamental difference lies in the fact that they were introduced into the Italian language system in different periods of time. Words of Latin origin have been inherited from generation to generation. Despite their Latin origins, these words are considered as part of the native language. Learned loan words, however, are introduced into Italian by scholars who studied ancient

Greek works. The year of 960AD was when *Placito Capuano* was written, thus became a turning point in which the days of words of Latin origin ushered out and the years of learned loan words ushered in. Hence, loan words mentioned in this article refer to those adopted from foreign languages after 1000AD when the Italian language came into being.

## 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF LATIN LOAN WORDS IN THE CONSTITUTION OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE

“According to their development, words can be categorized into general words, obsolete words and neologisms.” “Neologisms are words that emerge lately.” (Qi, 2007) Neologisms are created mainly in two ways – either by complying with the word formation principles of the Italian language based on the existing words or by taking in foreign words. That is borrowing. Borrowing has been a critical means for the enrichment of a language. From the day when it was born, the Italian language has been borrowing words from other languages.

Statistics drawn from *Il Dizionario Sabatini Coletti<sup>2</sup>* (a widely recognized Italian dictionary) (Sabatini, 2005) show that among all 79,734 words that have been confirmed with an etymon, loan words, a total of 36,740, take up 46%, and the Latin ones take up 52.1% with an amount of 19, 143. According to an analysis of random samples extracted from another Italian dictionary *DEVOTO (1968)* by Italian scholars, Latin loan words in the Italian language take up an even higher proportion of 66.8% among all the loan words in the dictionary (Marazzini, 2001).

**Table 1**  
**Random Samples From *DEVOTO (1968)***

	Percentage in all loan words	Percentage in common loan words
Latin loan words	66.8%	70.0%
Ancient Greek loan words	10.9%	5.3%
French loan words	7.8%	10.2%
English loan words	0.7%	1.5%
German loan words	1.0%	1.1%
Arabic loan words	1.0%	1.5%
Spanish loan words	1.8%	1.5%
Loan words from other foreign languages	9.6%	8.7%

Data source: Marazzini, C. (2001). *The Italian language* (La lingua Italiana) (p.454). Bologna: Zanichelli.

<sup>1</sup> Placito: a southern city in Italy, 25 kilometers north to Naples. Built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., it later developed into an important industrial city in Italy.

<sup>2</sup> Random samples are extracted from p.3, 61, 119, 183, 247, 267, 389, 435, 461 and 464 of the *The Italian Language* by Claudio Marazzini.

Table 1 shows an intriguing fact that both ancient Greek and Latin are main sources of the loan words in Italian, but the proportions of loan words of these two origins in all loan words and in common loan words tell a difference of their importance. Ancient Greek loan words take up 10.9% in all loan words but only 5.3% in the common loan words, and Latin loan words up to 66.8% in all loan words and even a 70.0% in the common loan words. The figures are gathered to tell that Latin loan words are much more frequent than ancient Greek loan words in Italian language.

#### 4. LATIN LOAN WORDS IN THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE

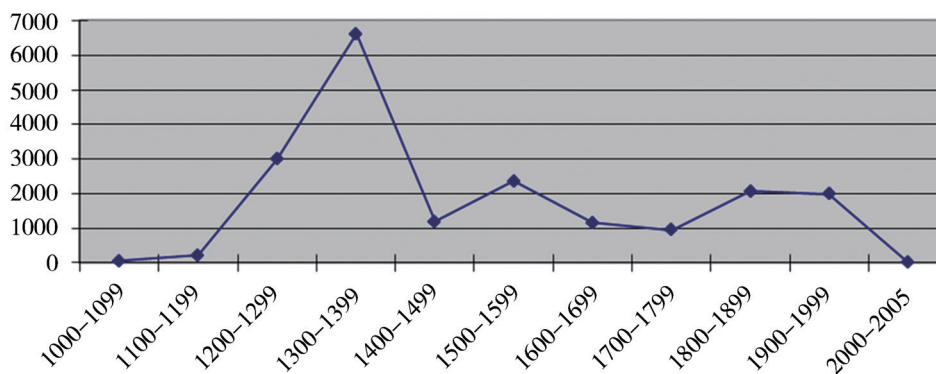
To some extent, the historical and cultural traits of Italy presented throughout its development and unification of the Italian nation determine the constitution of its loan words. In modern Italian, Latin loan words outperform those of ancient Greek, French, English and German

origins in quantity. It is apparent that Latin loan words take such an important role in the Italian language.

In the following paragraphs, analyses of Latin loan words in the Italian language will be given from different aspects.

##### 4.1 Latin Loan Words in Different Periods of Time

Some of the loan words were introduced into the Italian language with more than one definition in different periods of time. For example, *accesso* was borrowed in the thirteenth century with the meaning “(disease) come on” and in the sixteenth century the meaning of “access”. Another example is *testo*, which became an Italian word meaning “(a Buddhist instrument) made of medal or pottery” and in the fourteenth century two more definitions were added, “text” and “intertwined”. *Dirigente* was firstly introduced in the eighteenth century with the definition of “leading” and later in 1846 “leader”. In this article, the times recorded were when the loan words were firstly imported.



**Figure 1**  
Latin Loan Words in the Italian Language From 11<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In Italian, 18,687 Latin loan words are settled with the time they were firstly introduced. As seen from Chart 1, the development of Latin loan words was at its peak in the fourteenth century with a total number of 6,411, which takes up 34.3%. Several other highs of the curve are 2,995

(16.0%) in the thirteenth century, 2,366 (12.7%) in the sixteenth century, 2,064 (11.0%) in the nineteenth century and 1,992 (10.7%) in the twentieth century. Historical lows were experienced in the eleventh, twelfth and twenty-first century, the total of which take up less than 1.5%.

**Table 2**  
Latin loan words in Italian From 11<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century

Year	Latin loan words	Percentage in total number of Latin loan words	Total loan words	Percentage in total number of loan words
1000-1099	61	0.3%	66	92.4%
1100-1199	215	1.1%	272	79.0%
1200-1299	2,995	16.0%	3,188	94.0%
1300-1399	6,611	35.4%	7,006	94.4%
1400-1499	1,198	6.4%	1,407	85.2%
1500-1599	2,366	12.7%	3,008	78.7%
1600-1699	1,154	6.2%	1,731	66.7%
1700-1799	944	5.1%	1,826	51.7%
1800-1899	2,064	11.1%	4,847	42.6%
1900-1999	1,992	10.7%	7,855	25.4%
2000-2005	0	0	28	0.00%

Data say that in the Italian language 31,155 loan words have been confirmed with the time when they were firstly borrowed. Over centuries, Latin loan words have taken up more than 50%, especially at the peak of its development when the proportion was up to 94%. Specifically, it was 94% in the thirteenth century and 94.4% in the fourteenth century. In addition, despite continuous borrowings from Latin, the proportion has experienced a significant decrease since the nineteenth century as loan words from other foreign languages were gradually adopted.

While Latin loan words have known their highs and lows in the passage of time and a sharp decrease of its proportion in amount, they have been a persistent source of Italian words throughout the history. Hence, Latin loan words have played a crucial role in the Italian vocabulary.

#### 4.2 Latin Loan Words in Different Fields

Latin loan words that are utilized in certain fields amount to 7,047. A small proportion of them are introduced into more than one field. For example, *cellula* was borrowed to signify “cell” in biology, “airframe” in aviation and “component” in electronics. The same goes to *agente* that in chemistry it means “agent”, in trade “agent” and in medicine “element”.

From the following statistics in forth-one fields, in the Italian language, Latin loan words are most popular in zoology, medicine, botany, judiciary, grammar and mathematics. Zoology, medicine and botany are the top three, each with a total of more than 1,000. Latin loan words in zoology take up 18.1%, in medicine 17.7% and in botany 16.2% of the total.

**Table 3**  
**Latin Loan Words in Different Fields**

Field	Amount	Percentage in all Latin loan words in Italian	Field	Amount	Percentage in all Latin loan words in Italian
Medicine	1,309	18.58%	Food	59	0.84%
Zoology	1,340	19.02%	Machinery	85	1.21%
Botany	1,220	17.31%	Electronics	79	1.12%
Sports	349	4.95%	Biology	76	1.08%
Grammar	511	7.25%	Philology	87	1.23%
Navigation	211	2.99%	Publishing	102	1.45%
Judiciary	563	7.99%	Agriculture	71	1.01%
Mathematics and statistics	446	6.33%	Archaeology	76	1.08%
Chemistry	327	4.64%	Politics	58	0.82%
Geology and metallurgy	261	3.70%	Aviation	36	0.51%
Trade	346	4.91%	Telecommunication	30	0.43%
Physics	313	4.44%	Artifact	34	0.48%
Music	238	3.38%	Heraldry	42	0.60%
Theology	336	4.77%	Rhetoric and semiotics	39	0.55%
Philosophy and sociology	241	3.42%	Art	20	0.28%
Informatics	132	1.87%	Archival science	21	0.30%
Architecture planning	190	2.70%	Astrology	25	0.35%
Technology	116	1.65%	Automobile	3	0.04%
Phycology	96	1.36%	Anthropology	14	0.20%
Military	104	1.48%	Philately	9	0.13%
Astronomy	180	2.55%			

A further analysis will follow to figure out the importance of Latin loan words in the six fields mentioned above. The number of Latin loan words in these six fields are 1,873 in zoology, 5,206 in medicine, 2,116 in botany, 1,088 in judiciary, 1,372 in grammar

and 1,003 in mathematics, with a proportion of 71.5%, 25.1%, 56.7%, 51.8%, 37.2% and 44.5% in the amount of the respective terminology. Those that exceed 50% include zoology, botany and judiciary, and those in medicine, grammar and mathematics also reach a quarter

of the total. Therefore, the vitality of Latin loan words in Italian is conspicuous.

### 4.3 Latin Loan Words in Different Parts of Speech

“Part of speech has been the center in the syntactic study of vocabulary since the ancient Greek and Roman times.” “The difference between two arbitrary parts of speech in any language is presented in their syntactic features.” The lexical category of a word accords to its meaning, internal structure and syntax. “Syntactic meaning is predominant in deciding how a word can be grouped.” (Qi, 2007) The following paragraphs will be devoted to the analysis of Latin loan words from the perspective of part of speech. Nouns, adjectives, verbs, prepositions, pronouns, adverbs, articles and conjunctions in Italy will all be covered.

In the Italian language, loan adjectives imported from Latin amount to 5,094, of which 5,028 are qualitative

loan adjectives and 66 are restrictive loan adjectives. The number of Latin loan adverbs reaches 197, including 128 simple adverbs and 69 adverb phrases. 54 Latin loan conjunctions are borrowed and 28 of them are simple conjunctions. As for interjections, there are 19. 82 prepositions and prepositional phrases, including 18 simple ones are adopted. Latin pronouns are calculated to be 94, or more accurately, 18 demonstrative pronouns, 26 indefinite pronouns, 6 possessive pronouns, 3 interrogative pronouns and exclamatory pronouns, 38 personal pronouns, 3 relative pronouns. Latin verbs are up to 2,633. Among them, 3 are auxiliary verbs, 23 linking verbs, 15 impersonal verbs, 6 modal verbs, 14 reflexive verbs. Intransitive verbs and transitive verbs take up the most respectively with a number of 1,028 and 1,544. Latin loan nouns and noun phrases give the best performance with 10,962 in total, 10,869 of which are simple nouns and 93 are phrases.

**Table 4**  
**Latin Loan Words in Different Part of Speeches**

Part of speech	Latin loan words	Percentage in total number of Latin loan words	Percentage in total number of Italian words of same part of speech
Nouns	10,962	57.3%	19.3% (56,798)
Adjectives	5,094	26.6%	24.8% (20,563)
Verbs	2,633	13.8%	27.9% (9,436)
Adverbs	197	1%	29.1% (676)
Pronouns	94	0.5%	63.1% (149)
Conjunctions	54	0.3%	14.8% (365)
Interjection	19	0.1%	12.8% (149)
Prepositions	18	0.1%	4.4% (412)
Articles	8	0.04%	57.1% (14)

It can be seen from Table 4 that most of the Latin loan words in Italian are nouns, adjectives or verbs, which are up to 97.6%. Nouns exceed other kinds of part of speech in amount with a 57.3%, adjectives 26.6% and verbs 13.8%. Latin loan words of each part of speech also have favorable performance in their respective category, with conjunctions, interjections and prepositions less than 15%, nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs ranging from 19% to 29% and pronouns and articles over 50%. So, from the perspective of part of speech, Latin loan words in the Italian vocabulary play a significant role.

This article attempts to analyze the Latin loan words in the Italian language from the time they were borrowed, the fields they are involved in and the part of speech they belong to. Throughout the analysis, observations can be listed as follow – Latin is the main source of loan words in the Italian language with a proportion of 51.2%; historically, the development of Latin loan words reached its peak in the thirteenth and fourteenth century with 51.4% in total; Latin loan words mainly give their play in zoology, medicine, botany, judiciary, grammar and

mathematics; most of them (97.6%) are nouns, adjectives or verbs, and loan nouns take up the largest proportion of 57.3%. A conclusion can be given from the whole article that Latin imposes an essential influence in the development of the Italian language whether before or after its emergence.

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